**THE WORK OF WAITING**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**
**November 29, 2009**

**JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Luke 21:25–36**
**Psalm 25:1–10**

**“For you I wait all day long.”**
**Psalm 25:5 (NRSV)**

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,
And with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded,
For with blessing in his hand,
Christ out God to earth descendeth,
Our full homage to demand.

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”
Liturgy of St. James, fourth century

*We wait together for the coming of a savior. We wait*
*as men and women have waited down through the centuries*
*for a word of comfort and hope. With music and words*
*from the past, we wait for Jesus to be born among us.*
*So speak the word you have for us this morning.*
*Come into our lives again, with love and challenge*
*and kindness and hope. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

“I wait all day long,” the psalmist said. “Be alert. Watch,” Jesus said. “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

There is an almost perfect secular equivalent to the major biblical theme of waiting and watching in hope for the kingdom to come. It’s in the air these days. Everyone knows the words:

O, you better watch out,
You better not cry, you better not pout,
I’m tellin’ you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.

There is something almost painful, but at the same time delicious, about a child's waiting for Christmas—counting the days, anticipating, wishing, hoping, until the night of December 24; the waiting is so intense, so focused, that little ones have trouble falling asleep.

It's a variation on the waiting we do all our lives: we wait to be old enough to go to school, to ride a bicycle, to get a driver's license, to graduate. We wait to land a job, meet the right person. We wait for a promotion, a raise, and we wait for success. We wait all our lives for security; we wait for retirement. And I can't possibly preach a sermon on waiting in hope without mentioning the obvious: fans of the Chicago Cubs have been waiting in hope, year after year, for more than a century.

There is something about waiting, Barbara Brown Taylor says, that so focuses your attention that you cannot hear or see anything else. Lying in bed at night, unable to sleep, waiting for your teenager to come home, listening for the sound of the car in the driveway and the back door opening, is so galvanizing—I know, I've done it—that you literally shut out every other sound (*Bread of Angels*).

Waiting is such a universal and deeply human experience. Some literary scholars think the most important work of literature of the twentieth century is a play, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* The play is read and taught and discussed by students of our culture as a metaphor for the spiritual tenor of our times. Two men sit down to wait for Godot. They talk and talk and you're not sure who Godot is, although Godot is spelled G-O-D-O-T. It seems like an obvious synonym for God. The play ends and Godot never comes.

We are actually not very good at waiting. The late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian who lived and taught in the United States until he died, was a very astute observer of American culture. He wrote. "Waiting is not very popular. In fact, most people consider waiting to be a waste of time. The culture says, 'Get going! Do something! Don't just sit there and wait.' For many people waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to be."

Patience is a challenge. A flight delay at the airport, an unanticipated traffic jam on the expressway, a meeting that drones on and on beyond the point of relevance or usefulness, a doctor's appointment that leaves us sitting in a waiting room for an hour becomes a real crisis, emotional and physical, with elevated stress, heart beat, and blood pressure.

Our culture does not reward or applaud patient waiting. Nouwen was right: culture celebrates action, results, instant gratification. We are still sorting out the recent financial meltdown—failed banks and huge financial institutions collapsing, families going "under water," mortgage foreclosures. But everyone agrees that among the causes was and is the culturally celebrated, advertising-stimulated, impatience of the American consumer. We want it all—now. We are entitled to it—not years from now, but now.

Someone said that the very best advice anyone could give an American is not "Don't just sit there, do something," which continues to get us in all kinds of trouble, but the opposite, "Don't just do something; sit there."

Waiting is a major biblical theme: "I wait for the Lord all day long," the psalmist wrote and we read together this morning.

> Psalm 27:14: Wait for the Lord
> Psalm 130:5: I will wait for the Lord
> Hosea 12:6: Wait continually for your God
> Micah 7:7: Wait for the God of salvation

And my favorite:

> Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength
> they shall mount up with wings like eagles
> they shall run and not be weary,
> they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40: 31)

That's a lot of waiting. And in the Bible, it happens in a situation that is bleak and not at all hopeful: the exile, when God's people have been defeated, humiliated, expelled from their homes and homeland, have watched their beloved city and its magnificent temple be destroyed. That is to say, in very real hopelessness and despair. We sing about those people in Advent: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here." Over and over again their prophets and poets advise them to wait, watch and wait in hope, for their God will come.

In the Gospel reading this morning, for the First Sunday in Advent, waiting for God, waiting for the kingdom to come, is cast in dramatically apocalyptic language, disturbing, frightening images.

Jesus and his disciples have just arrived in Jerusalem, and his Galilean friends are dazzled by the wonderful sights, like tourists on Michigan

Avenue—the shops, busy streets full of people, and the magnificent temple, so big and glorious, like nothing they had ever seen before, the House of God. All of it, Jesus said, all of it could be gone in a minute. And some of them lived to see it happen—the destruction of the city and the temple, when Rome crushed a rebellion and leveled the city and drove out its inhabitants. It was the end of the world as they knew it.

The passage is a favorite for modern apocalypticists—the authors of the enormously popular *Left Behind* books, for instance—who see in current events a fulfillment of Jesus' first-century warnings: portents in the heavens, signs in the stars, storms, wars. The modern version leads to Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil, the defeat of the anti-Christ, and the rapture. And for many, the way to get ready for it is to find an unused bomb shelter, stock up with water and food, arm yourself to the teeth, and watch and wait for the battle.

Jesus seems to have something else in mind. "Be alert," he says. "Watch, stand up, raise your head." The waiting he has in mind, the coming of God, apparently is not to be dreaded but eagerly awaited, hoped for. It will be a redemption, a fulfillment, a world coming as God intended it: a world characterized by justice and peace, a world where people will be secure and content, a time when little children will not be shot in the streets, where 45,000 people do not die for lack of health care, a world where weapons are transformed into farm implements, a world characterized by kindness and compassion and love—love of God and love of people for one another.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, be on guard, Jesus said, "not so you will know when to grab your crash helmet and head for the basement, but so you will know where the kingdom of God is. So you will not miss God when God comes" (*Bread of Angels,* p.159).

Advent is the time when we begin serious waiting for Christmas, for the birth of the child, but it is also when we think about the future the child promised and embodied and taught and lived, the kingdom of God he promised was coming but is already present in the world, if you can wait and watch patiently enough to see it.

Waiting for that promised time is not "waiting it out," sitting around whiling away the days and weeks and years of your life, killing time. No, Advent waiting is living into that future, working for the kingdom, supporting with your resources, advocating, arguing, voting, fighting for the kingdom. It is not the mindless, ultimately meaningless waiting of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot,* which some think is merely waiting for death. It is active waiting, confident waiting, waiting in hope.

William Sloane Coffin told his congregation at Riverside Church in Manhattan, “I don’t want Riverside to be an institution for those interested in things religious. I want it to irrigate the community with hope” (*Sermons*, vol. 2, p. 337).

What a great image for the church: “irrigating the community with hope.” Waiting for the kingdom by working for the values of the kingdom, joining in the work Jesus Christ is already doing in the world, working for his kingdom of justice and peace and kindness and generosity with a fierce hope that never dies.

Fourth Church received two letters recently that made me think this church knows how to wait for the kingdom by irrigating the community with hope.

The church website recently included a picture of Sunday Night Supper, a nutritious meal provided weekly in Anderson Hall for 150 people, some of them homeless, all of them hungry. Byron White, down in Jackson, Mississippi, saw the picture on August 22 and wrote to Kathleen McKenzie, Director of our Social Service Center, which manages Sunday Night Supper.

> Dear Ms. McKenzie:
> I lived in Chicago from 1993 to 2003. During that time period, I was hopelessly addicted to drugs and alcohol. I stayed in several places in the vicinity of the church including the Lawson House YMCA on Chicago Avenue, and the Cedar Hotel on North State and Division Street. They were real hellholes, and that was what my life was like back then.
>
> However during that time period, I was a regular at the Sunday Night Supper and was a grateful recipient of many of the services provided by the Elam Davies Social Service Center.
>
> Today, by the grace of God, I am clean and sober going on seven years, and God has blessed me tremendously since my turning my life over to his care. I saw the picture of the dining room on the website and have fond memories of eating some of the best and only decent meals I had ever eaten during that time period in that very room. I used to play the piano in the corner while we waited for dinner to be served, and I loved the fellowship there.
>
> I am glad to see that Sunday Night Suppers still continue, as it, and the rest of the ministry there, was such a lifeline to me in a time of such pain and suffering. I would like to make a donation to that

ministry. Please provide information to whom and where I can send a check.

Byron White

And then, in the middle of October, *Tribune* columnist Mary Schmich wrote a column about our Tutoring program and the Christmas card sale that supports it, telling about the 400 city youngsters who come here each week for a nutritious meal and an hour and a half of one-to-one tutoring with a volunteer tutor. Teresa Simpson read the column and wrote to Mary Schmich, who passed the letter on to us.

Dear Ms. Schmich:

Reading your article brought tears to my eyes. I am a product of the program from the Fourth Presbyterian Church. I walked there in the ’60s with some friends I had met there. We were all from broken homes—no father—and we were good kids. We were all from Cabrini-Green, walking down Oak Street, from Orleans all the way to Michigan Avenue. There were hundreds of us. And the group of us, three boys and three girls, made the trek, twice a week, for years. When we got older, the church asked us if we wanted a job. We worked there, twice a week until high school. The walks we did gave us a different outlook on life, and the friendship of that church shall never be forgotten. Today I am fifty-two years old, have been working for the United States Postal Service for thirty-two years, and purchased a condominium in the Gold Coast area, where we used to walk those many years ago. I wanted to write to you to express to you how the Fourth Presbyterian Church gave me an opportunity to give back to the community and has made me the person that I am today. I also wanted you to know that I am forever grateful for the church’s kindness and love and will forever be in their debt. I am a member of the church, however I never attend. I work a lot of hours and get off at 6:30 in the evenings. By that time, the Tutoring program is usually over, but trust me, as soon as I retire? Thank you for your article; it made me cry.

Sincerely,
Teresa D. Simpson

That’s what it means to watch for the kingdom by irrigating the community with hope.

O, you better watch out,

You better not cry, you better not pout,
I'm tellin' you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.

For the little ones, it's a time for serious waiting.

And for, us on the first Sunday of Advent, we wait too, for the coming of God into our world and into our lives.

God comes in ways we do not expect—like the birth of a baby to a peasant couple in a remote outpost of the empire.

And God comes with comfort through the kindness of a friend when we lose someone we love.

God comes with healing through gentle touch, a nurse, a dear one.

God comes with reassurance when we are afraid.

God comes with energizing spirit when we are discouraged and life-giving love when we are depressed.

And God comes in programs of churches, in people who understand a little of who Jesus Christ was and what he was about; people who love him and love the idea of his kingdom and a bit of that kingdom appearing right here in the life of the world when they share his love with someone who needs it.

The message of Advent is that God comes into the world—to lonely exiles centuries ago and to you and me. But you have to watch and wait in hope and do the good work of waiting and hoping.

God comes quietly—in the birth of the child of Bethlehem long ago and in the birth of love today, now, in the world, in your life and mine. Amen.